

VZCZCXRO5628  
RR RUEHDBU  
DE RUEHYE #1422 2841214  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 111214Z OCT 06  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4137

C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 001422

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: TV STATION DROPS INTERVIEW WITH OPPOSITION  
POLITICIAN

REF: YEREVAN 1075

Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

¶1. (C) A regional television station run by members of a pro-governmental parliamentary group decided not to air an interview with the head of the opposition Orinats Yerkir party and former parliamentary speaker Artur Baghdasarian. The move demonstrates the low level of professionalism of the Armenian mass media, and is consistent with a continuing trend of media self-censorship and reported governmental interference in broadcast television. END SUMMARY.

-----  
TV STATION FAILS TO AIR INTERVIEW WITH OPPOSITION FIGURE  
-----

¶2. (C) On October 4, Mig TV, a regional television station based in Lori region, recorded an interview with head of the opposition Orinats Yerkir Party Baghdasarian. After telling the party that it would broadcast the interview on October 7, the day after recording the interview Mig TV told Orinats Yerkir that it would only air the interview if it could cut the parts during which Baghdasarian insulted the governor of Lori, criticized Armenian officials for reaping the spoils of an artificially inflated currency, and spoke negatively about Armenian authorities. Mig TV Director Harutyunian told us that these portions of the interview were "improper," and that by airing them he believed he would be violating the Armenian law that says broadcasters cannot air campaign materials until the official beginning of campaign season. Harutyunian said that Orinats Yerkir agreed to let him cut Baghdasarian's criticism of the Lori governor, but not other parts of the interview, and thus he chose not to air the interview at all. Harutyunian told us he planned to return the money Orinats Yerkir had paid for the interview. (NOTE: Harutyunian is a member of the People,s Deputy Group, a generally pro-government parliamentary association. Another member of the group, Vahram Baghdasarian, is widely assumed to own Mig TV. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Orinats Yerkir spokeswoman Abrahamian told us that she, as well as Baghdasarian and Orinats Yerkir, believed the television station had been forced not to air the interview. She said that, while she did not know who specifically gave the order, she believed it was someone high up in the Armenian government. Abrahamian also said that, when she asked Harutyunian why the television station decided not to air the interview, he said, "You should understand why," and that she understood this to imply that the decision had not been his own. According to Abrahamian, Baghdasarian and Orinats Yerkir have had continuing problems obtaining

broadcast time since the party left the ruling coalition earlier this year. She said the party may hold a press conference on the topic in the next few days.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

14. (C) This incident is consistent with the immaturity and low level of professionalism of the Armenian mass media. Rather than attempting to air programs that draw public interest and receive high ratings, television stations cater to the political interests of their owners and the ruling authorities. As a result, broadcasters often engage in self-censorship to promote their political agendas and ensure that they do not lose their broadcast licenses, as independent Al-Plus television station did in 2002. Since Mig TV chose not to air the interview only after it received payment, recorded the interview, and heard Baghdasarian's criticism of government officials, this appears to be a clear case of self-censorship by a pro-government television station. While broadcasters have told us that they often choose not to interview certain opposition figures, either due to political affiliations or at the order of the president's office (reftel), this is the first time we have heard of Baghdasarian being among these opposition members. As the 2007 parliamentary elections approach, both self-censorship and direct government pressure on the media appear to be on the rise. In addition to continuing our own inquiries with the government, we plan to ask OSCE Ambassador Finley to broach the subject of press freedom with President Kocharian, s chief of staff during her visit here later this month.  
GODFREY